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# 'Frail worms of the earth': philosophical reflections on the meaning of life

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**Abstract:** Many philosophers in the analytic tradition have recently sought to explore the question of the meaning of life. In the first part of this paper I subject two important approaches from this tradition – those of John Cottingham and Susan Wolf – to criticism. I then suggest that Cottingham and Wolf articulate certain assumptions about the meaning of life that are widely shared amongst analytic philosophers. I go on to subject those assumptions to criticism and seek to develop an alternative approach to the question, one that is largely overlooked in the contemporary literature.

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a fair amount of work in analytic philosophy that seeks to explore the question of the meaning of life. The first aim of this paper is to discuss briefly some of this work, focusing on a couple of specific representative examples, highlighting what I take to be their main weaknesses. I shall then argue that, despite the differences between them, the main contributors to the debate, and not only the two examples considered, share a certain outlook on the meaning of life, that this outlook, at best, captures only a part of what we are concerned with when we think about the meaning of life, and that there is another approach to the issue that, though ignored or overlooked in the contemporary literature, is more helpful. I shall, accordingly, explore this other approach.

Before I begin the discussion proper, it is worth making, albeit briefly, a point about the (philosophical) methodology, broadly construed, of such discussions, that is, discussions about such large and far-reaching matters as the meaning of life, matters that feed from, and have ramifications for, just about everything else one thinks. Philosophers aim, often at any rate, for a neutrality in their discussions, an independence of the personal, the local and the culturally parochial. But in such matters as the question of the meaning of life it is highly unlikely, I think, that such neutrality is obtainable. For sure, one seeks to give reasons for what one thinks, and one seeks to avoid the idiosyncratic and merely personal, and to that extent one seeks for agreement or consensus, but I doubt very much that any such philosophical discussion can wholly escape any given philosopher's temperament, his or her sense of what William James (James [2000 [1907] 7) called an 'individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos'. If this is right, then it is as well for me to acknowledge at the outset that my own temperament is bound to affect my discussion. I hope, nonetheless, that readers who look at things differently will

nonetheless see that there are, after all, powerful reasons for the view I offer, and find their own thinking helped by their reflection on them. Perhaps, in any case, no philosophy does more than that.<sup>1</sup>

### **John Cottingham on the meaning of life**

We may begin with a recent book-length study, John Cottingham's *On the Meaning of Life* (Cottingham (2003)). Cottingham claims in his book that 'to call an activity or a life meaningful normally implies a certain *profundity* or *seriousness*' (*ibid.*, 21). A meaningful life must be '*achievement-oriented*, that is, directed towards some goal, or requiring some focus of energy or concentration or rhythm in its execution' (*ibid.*). Further, 'meaningfulness in action implies a certain degree of *self-awareness* or *transparency to the agent*: for me to engage in a meaningful activity I must have some grasp of what I am doing, and my interpretation of it must reflect purposes of my own that are more or less transparent to me' (*ibid.*, 22).

Furthermore, Cottingham claims that if individuals act out of 'anger, resentment or a sense of inferiority, for example, it already looks as if they may be falling short of the autonomy and selfhood that is necessary for us to say that their projects represent their own unmanipulated choices about how best to live' (*ibid.*, 24).<sup>2</sup> Again, appealing to the idea that to be fully human is to be able to subject one's actions to moral evaluation, Cottingham claims that one becomes less human in pursuing activities that involve 'deceiving or hurting others, or making use of them as mere instrumental fodder for one's own successes, closing one's heart and mind to the voice of one's fellow creatures'. He suggests that someone whose life involves such things – the concentration camp guard is his example – will nonetheless need to be open to others 'if only in his off-duty hours', and this will 'inevitably create a psychic dissonance', indicating that his life cannot be truly meaningful (*ibid.*, 27). Cottingham draws the conclusion that, for a life to be meaningful, it must be open to others – *morally* open to others: it must be one 'whose fundamental dispositions are structured in such a way as not to foreclose genuine emotional interaction and genuine critical dialogue' with others (*ibid.*, 29).<sup>3</sup> So, the activities to which such a meaningful life must be devoted cannot reflect 'just any old purposes or projects we happen to adopt, but those that are genuinely worthwhile' and these must include genuinely *morally* worthwhile activities (*ibid.*, 32).

Cottingham's account goes further than this, but we have enough to be getting on with. And it seems to me that it is open to telling objections. There appears to be an oddity in saying, in the first place, that an activity or a life must be achievement oriented to be meaningful. There seem to be many things in human life, such as friendship and love, that would be destroyed by such a way of conceiving them. Schiller remarked that we are most truly ourselves when we *play*, and it may be that love and friendship are most truly what they are, and most truly meaningful, when they resemble forms of play. Moreover, very many of the most important and meaningful things seem to be so precisely because they have no purpose or aim: horse racing, for one, if John Wisdom (Wisdom

(1992)) is right, as well as many other games and sports, much art which, irrespective of what one thinks about the idea of 'art for art's sake', seems wonderful because gratuitous, and all the play of life of sharing meals, friendly talk, looking at the natural world and so on, none of which is achievement oriented or *for* anything.

Someone might reply that this misses Cottingham's point. What he means is not that a meaningful life cannot contain activities that have no goal or are not achievement oriented, but that such activities have to exist alongside, or be somehow 'nested' in, other activities that are so oriented. But even if this is so, that seems to miss the point, for it would imply that the real burden of meaning is found in those activities that are achievement oriented and that the others that are not so inherit their meaning from them. But this claim, clearly enough, would collapse into the one I have been criticising and would thus get us nowhere.

Be that as it may, it may seem plausible to claim that a person who acts in his or her life out of anger, resentment or a sense of inferiority cannot be living a truly meaningful life until we remember that such psychological traits, or those related to them, are to be found in many whose lives obviously are meaningful – one might think here of some of the great thinkers, writers and artists, such as Kleist, Kafka, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. We know that psychological deformation is often a condition of the production of art. Kafka, for example, was wracked by a sense of inferiority, burdened by feelings of guilt and filled with much disgust. As is well known, he wrote out of these, but one can hardly claim that this made his life less meaningful. He certainly fell short of full autonomy and selfhood, in some senses, but it would strain credulity to say that this rendered his life less meaningful or even meaningless. Moreover, we *all*, to some extent, fall short of autonomy and selfhood and we are *all*, again to some extent, manipulated various ways – think about the way in which a certain kind of thoughtless abdication of independence accompanies our willingness to engage so smoothly in the bureaucratic organizations that are so dominant in our lives. Are we to say that none of us leads a meaningful life?

It is worth stressing here that I am not claiming that all the great thinkers, artists, writers and the like experience anger, resentment and so on, as did Kafka. There are certainly exceptions. But that is not the point. Certainly, if there were only a very few examples of those whose creative energy was fuelled by their anger or whatever then we might be able to dismiss them as aberrant. But there is no doubt that the phenomenon to which I am referring and for which I am using Kafka as one example is so widespread as to be a commonplace of human experience, a recurrent feature of the human scene in widely different social and cultural contexts. Given that this is so, Cottingham's point appears to fly in the face of one of the standing limitations of the human condition, and it is implausible to suppose that the meaning of the lives of whole swathes of human beings is impaired or undermined or, at the limit, negated, because they created out of resentment or anger or the like.

Still, it might be said, in the lives of the rest of us, non-artists, the common ruck, things do not work this way, and anger or resentment distorts us, diminishes us,

and thus impacts negatively on the meaning of our lives. And that, it might be said, is Cottingham's point.

I have not the space to answer this objection in the detail it deserves. I certainly grant that resentment and anger can have the effect suggested – and not only in the lives of unexceptional individuals. But I have argued at length elsewhere (Hamilton (2016), ch.4) that it is false to claim that the so-called vices – egoism, vanity, greed and the like – are wholly alien to the virtues: in my view, we have very good reasons to believe that such traits of character are intimately bound up with the virtues and nourish them. That they can get out of hand and distort lives in many different ways is beyond doubt.<sup>4</sup> But this is not the issue: they need to be tempered and channelled, for sure, but not excised from the soul in any life that is devoted to perfectly ordinary concerns of family and work. Egoism and vanity, for example, lie deep in the roots of much love, including parental love, and to suppose that the kinds of traits of character that Kafka and others turned to account in their artistic production distort the rest of us or make our lives less meaningful is not true, I believe, so long, as I have said, they are channelled in various ways – as they were in and by Kafka.

It is, in any case, unclear what Cottingham means by saying that we must be open to others. We might, perhaps, say that someone *totally* closed to others is less than fully human in some normative sense, but there are far fewer such people than philosophers often like to image: thieves, murderers and so on are open to some people some of the time. So what counts as being open in the relevant sense? There will be no account here that does not express a certain evaluative perspective. Are we not all of us to some extent closed to others? Anyone with only a glancing acquaintance with human affairs will surely have noticed the ubiquity of our egoism, our inattention to others, our unwillingness or inability to engage with others in their need and suffering. We all of us, at least at times, refuse 'genuine emotional interaction and genuine critical dialogue' with others, even those we love, for such interaction and dialogue is difficult, tiring, demanding. Or again, someone might say, we all close our hearts and minds to our fellow creatures all the time, since, in a world 'bursting with sin and sorrow', as Samuel Johnson put it, we inevitably do this in order not to be overwhelmed by our own moral failure and weakness and to get on with things that matter to us. One might reply that this is not what Cottingham has in mind, and this is no doubt true, but the point is, as I have said, that his view cannot be used to justify any claim that such-and-such a life is meaningful or meaningless, since it will simply express such a claim from an evaluative perspective.

One might appeal here to Cottingham's idea that those who are not open to others in some fairly robust sense suffer from some kind of psychic dissonance. But, in reply, one must simply insist that this is not so. It seems clear that plenty of concentration camps guards were not psychically disturbed in the relevant sense at all. Moreover, when we turn from such stock examples we see that selfishness is no bar, as such, to a meaningful life. Lucian Freud, for example, as a recent biography of him makes clear (Greig (2013)), was about as selfish a person as one can be and still interact with others, but he suffered no psychic

dissonance – on the contrary, he was a marvel of such health – and his life cannot reasonably be thought to be meaningless.

Cottingham's suggestions, then, do little to *justify* his claims concerning meaning in life: rather, they express a view of the kind of life he would admire and find meaningful. Even if one were to agree with him in that admiration, that establishes nothing from a philosophical point of view.

### **Susan Wolf on meaning and why it matters**

Let us now turn to consider a second recent attempt to spell out in philosophical terms the idea of the meaning of life. In a recent book (Wolf (2010)), Susan Wolf has argued that 'meaning arises from loving worthy objects of love and engaging with them in a positive way' (*ibid.*, 8). She grants that this is vague, and therefore goes on to gloss her own thought by saying that 'the idea is that a person's life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some thing or things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or, as I earlier put it, if she loves something'. Wolf adds that the things in question must be worthy, genuinely worthwhile. Hence, 'meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness' (*ibid.*, 9).

What does Wolf mean by engaging with some things 'in a positive way'? Consider again Kafka and Kleist. They certainly cared about, were gripped by, writing, which, I take it, we can assume is worthwhile, but their being so gripped and excited involved also their deeply resenting writing, finding it a terrible, life-denying calling. Their situation is not uncommon – think of van Gogh's anguished relation to his painting, or Fassbinder's tortured attitude towards his filmmaking, or Gerard Manley Hopkins' love of poetry which he always thought might be sinful and tried to abandon, and so on. In all these cases, the attitude that the person in question had towards his art was deeply ambivalent, full of pain. Perhaps Wolf would say that this made their lives less meaningful or even meaningless. But that hardly seems credible. But then, if she grants that their lives had meaning, at the very least we need to hear a great deal more about what Wolf understands by 'engaging in a positive way' with the objects in question such that it can involve hating, resenting, being tormented by, wanting to get away from, being bored by, being alienated from, such objects.

What Wolf has in mind is a *love* for the things in question. She comments that 'doing what one loves, being involved with things one really cares about, gives one a kind of joy in life that one would otherwise be without. The reason one should find one's passion and go for it, then, is because doing so will give one's life a particular type of good feeling' (*ibid.*, 13). She clearly has in mind a good feeling or joy that is sustained, not merely isolated moments of such. She calls this fulfilment. The root problem is clearly that Wolf is operating with an extremely simplistic account of human psychology, as if human psychology were not the massively impacted and messy thing it is: she writes, so to speak, as if Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and Freud had never existed. Love of anything whatever is a highly complicated matter, which always involves at least a shade of

rejection or hostility in some way, and often much more than a shade. There are psychoanalytic reasons for that, but it belongs, anyway, to ordinary observation of human life, for love always involves an element of need, and human beings resent in various ways the vulnerability and weakness that their need exposes. For sure, Wolf says that meaning in life is not the same as happiness, and I agree. She also says, rightly, that a life replete with meaning, that someone finds fulfilling, makes us 'vulnerable to pain, disappointment, and stress' (*ibid.*, 14). But my point is not that, say, Kafka and Kleist were unhappy, though they were – deeply so. My point is that it makes no sense to think in their, or any other cases, of love as being something wholly positive or, to put it another way, it makes no sense to think that they loved what they did if we think that love is wholly positive. Wolf talks as if the problems that commitment to some fulfilling way of life brings were entirely contingent, not internal to the very love that is in question. Kleist and Kafka found their passion and it gave them anything but joy or a particular kind of good feeling. They did not at all feel fulfilled in what they did in any sense that Wolf has in mind. Or say, if you like, that they were fulfilled, as long as you recognise that this kind of fulfilment has nothing whatever to do with a good feeling or joy.

Someone might object: Did not Kafka and Kleist experience moments of joy, moments in which they were ecstatic over their achievements? Certainly they did, moments in which all the pain, torment and agony of their lives fell away as they contemplated something finished, a piece of writing that they knew to be of the highest quality to be complete. And Kleist also certainly experienced such joy in the days leading up to that on which he blew his brains out. But this can hardly be what Wolf has in mind: such joy is not sustained, and it contains within itself a kind of agony that is part of what made it the joy it was, something desperate and lacerating. Nietzsche would call it 'Dionysian', a kind of euphoric self-fracturing or self-fragmenting, utterly distant from anything that one would appropriately call 'a good feeling'.

Be that as it may, even though Wolf wants to distance the notion of fulfilment in question from happiness – meaningfulness, she says, is a particular kind of value, 'neither subsumable under nor reducible to either happiness or morality' (*ibid.*, 8) - she cannot resist building into it something like happiness, seeing fulfilment as involving joy or a good feeling, as we have noted. She seems to overlook the kind of person Nietzsche calls a 'squandering spirit', someone who finds meaning in a passion so intense that he almost wills his own destruction in it. Wittgenstein's attitude to philosophy comes to mind in this context.

### **Objective and subjective meaning**

However, there is, I think, something more important going on in Cottingham and Wolf than the issues to which I have hitherto drawn attention. This is that they clearly suppose that the meaning of a life is to be found in the activities that the person leading that life carries out or is devoted to, where 'activities' includes not just projects and aims, but also the activities inherent in, for example, relationships, games, work and so on. What makes a life meaningful, on this view,

are the activities of that life. Cottingham thinks that those activities must be morally good and genuinely or intrinsically worthwhile. This means that he thinks it perfectly possible that a person find his life meaningful but his life be, in fact, meaningless – say, if he is devoted to activities that *he* might find meaningful but which are not so because not genuinely worthwhile. Wolf agrees with this last point. Some philosophers object to this on the grounds that, if a person finds his life meaningful, then it is, regardless of whatever anyone else thinks.

Virtually all of those who write on the meaning of life share the same outlook: they suppose that the issue of the meaning of life is one concerning the activities a person carries out, and then divide on whether a person's life can have meaning if he thinks it does even if (by someone else's lights) these activities are meaningless, not genuinely valuable or the like. Thaddeus Metz has made some such point by saying there are many philosophers who are *subjectivists* about this issue – he mentions William James, A.J. Ayer, Richard Taylor, Bernard Williams and Stephen Darwall - and others – he cites Robert Nozick, David Wiggins, Charles Taylor, Peter Singer and Susan Wolf – *objectivists*: the subjectivists think a life is meaningful if the individual whose life it is finds it to be so, and the objectivists disagree, claiming that the activities to which a life is devoted must themselves be meaningful if the life is to be so, irrespective of what the individual in question supposes (Metz (2013), 81).<sup>5</sup>

The debate in these terms reaches an *impasse*, each side relying on an intuition about meaning that the other rejects, even as both intuitions clearly have something to be said for them. For it is obvious why someone might suppose that the meaning of a life depends on the agent's feeling his life to have meaning, since - as it seems to many (see, e.g., Cahn (2008))- it appears absurd to say that someone who genuinely finds his life meaningful is mistaken. Nonetheless, there seems something right in the idea that a person might be devoted to absurd or trivial activities, find them meaningful, but be in some sense mistaken.

I am doubtful that it is possible to settle this debate in the terms available. The problem is that the emphasis on activities as we have explored it hitherto occludes an approach to the issue of the meaning of life that is, I believe, much deeper and more plausible than that proposed so far. I shall try to say what that is.

### **Some examples**

Let us step back. It seems to me that the kind of philosophical material I have been considering hitherto is at an extreme distance from the specificity and realism of a concern with the meaning of life of the kind that we find articulated in, for example, much literature or film. There seems no way, for example, of capturing in terms of activities and their value the way in which, at the end of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Bernard comes to give up hope on finding meaning in his life because he comes to distrust the telling of stories as such, the placing of human lives in narrative structures, because all this has come to seem to him in various ways arbitrary, endlessly open to yet further elaboration, elaboration



that might change the meaning of things altogether. Then there is Anna Karenina who, shortly before she takes her own life, sees her position ‘clearly in the piercing light which now revealed to her the meaning of life and of human relations’ (Tolstoy (1980 [1918/1877]), 755) – her suicide intimates what she took that meaning to be. Or again, in Gabriel Josipovici’s novel *Contre-Jour*, an imaginary reconstruction of the relationship between the painter Pierre Bonnard and his wife Marthe seen through the eyes of a daughter they never had, Bonnard says at one point: ‘[W]hen I have a pencil or brush in my hand I feel I am confronting the lies [on which all existence is based], but the rest of the time I am simply living them’ (Josipovici (1986), 23). There seems no way that this could be understood as a matter of which activities might be intrinsically valuable or not: it has to do, rather, with something akin to that which Kathleen Raine said when she wrote: ‘Our lives are encumbered with irrelevancies which we mistake for living experience, and which in the end come more and more to usurp it’ (Raine (1991), 263). There is a sense here that, *whatever* activities we devote ourselves to, *whatever* we do, we live cut off from the meaning of our lives, able to glimpse it only through a glass darkly, as if we were forever insufficient or inadequate to ourselves, to our own condition. Or again, at a more general level, if one thinks of the confusions, the perplexities, the forms of bafflement into which the characters in the novels of Dostoyevsky or Henry James or Joseph Conrad, the films of Bergman or Rohmer or Antonioni, fall, it is very hard to feel the sense that their problems might be addressed, let alone solved, by attention to activities, however rich in value. As I said above, what these novelists and filmmakers, and countless others, are exploring seems something more like the sense of some kind of fundamental inadequacy in human beings, of their precarious place in the world, of their dislocation from themselves. It may be unhealthy to meditate much on that, but that hardly shows it to be a false perspective, and it surely is very close to what people worry about when they worry about the meaning of their life, whilst being very far from the philosophical material we have been considering.

## Meaning and agency

What must strike us here is the fact that the philosophical material seems to work with the general idea that finding meaning in life enables one to live, makes sense of things, whereas the material from literature and film points in the opposite direction, giving, rather, a sense of the emptiness of human existence. Why might this be? I shall later suggest an answer to this question, but for the moment turn to consider a comment made by Hannah Arendt.

The disclosure of... ‘who’ [one is] through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always falls into an already existing web... Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, that action almost never achieves its purpose... Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his

own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of speech and action, reveal an agent, but this agent is not the author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author. (Arendt (1958), 184)<sup>6</sup>

This passage seems much closer in spirit to the kinds of concerns about meaning to which I have adverted from literature and film than is the philosophical approach with which we have been concerned so far. Suppose we started thinking about the meaning of human lives from this passage. What would things look like?

Arendt has a distinctly sceptical view of agency: she invites us to think of human beings as acting in a world in which they are exposed to many and various forces they do not control and cannot fully understand, and which shape deeply the purposes and goals of any given individual. Moreover, because we are caught up the web of pre-existent human relations that we did not choose, will outlast us, are largely contingent, and which we are very far from being able to understand fully, our identity is always to a greater or lesser extent a hostage to the fortune of others and their telling of our story. What I do always depends on others, even as I may be blind to this, on their cooperation, or on their willingness to abstain – my freedom, for example, to write this piece of philosophy may look from the inside as if it is simply an autonomous choice of my own, but right now I depend on my university to leave me alone, to have decided that doing this is a legitimate way for me to spend my time, and that itself depends on countless political, social and moral decisions of others over which I have no control at all and barely understand. Most of the time we suffer from idealised conceptions of agency that allow us to forget these kinds of realities about our lives.

It is in this sense that Arendt wants to say that one acts, but is not the author of one's life. Further, and relatedly, the story I tell of my life is doubly exposed to the web of interactions with others. It is so, first, in that the story I tell depends on others just as what I do depends on them; second, in that others might decide to tell a story about me, and that will inevitably be different from the story I tell of myself.

Consider now a second comment from Arendt. She is discussing matters from a political perspective, but what she says applies just as well to the individual or personal. 'The meaning', she writes,

of a committed act is revealed only when the action itself has come to an end and become a story susceptible to narration. Insofar as any 'mastering' of the past is possible, it consists in relating what has happened: but such narration, too, which shapes history, solves no problems and assuages no suffering: it does not master anything once and for all. (Arendt (1993), 21)<sup>7</sup>

What we have in Arendt then is a picture in which the struggle to find and tell the meaning of a life is deeply *aporetic*: every human being wishes to be the author of his own life, make or discover a meaning of his own for and in his life, but no human being can do this. What I take to be the meaning of my life is not only

itself largely out of my control because it depends on my insertion in a web of interactions with others, it is also the case that any stability I might achieve here, some consensus, let us say, is only temporary and might be changed or overturned by what others say.

For these reasons, we can say that the meaning of any life is always largely beyond the agent's control and never wholly stable. In this sense, the meaning of any person's life escapes him or her. Or, to put it another way, the meaning any given person takes his life to have is just one of the (in principle) limitless perspectives on that that are possible: what I say about the meaning of my life is just one of the possibilities for such meaning and cannot claim any special authority. It must find its place with what others say about my life.

It seems to me that Arendt's approach fits much better with the question of meaning as explored in the humane disciplines of literature, film and the like, than does the approach of thinkers like Cottingham and Wolf. It provides a better theoretical elucidation of the concerns in question. And not the least reason for this is that it helps us see why it is that, when such disciplines have explored the meaning of human life, they have arrived at the view that there is, as I put it earlier, some kind of fundamental inadequacy in human beings, something in their very condition which sets them against themselves. On Arendt's reading, what that is is precisely the need we have to achieve a stable sense of the meaning of our lives, our inability to forego that need, and the impossibility of fulfilling it.

On this view, a life always lags behind its meaning, and any meaning it has is always unstable, forever changing or flowing away from the person whose life it is. This is consonant with our experience, one aspect of which is that those things to which we devote ourselves in our lives attract us because we have a sense of their meaning in various ways, but in the pursuing of them that meaning changes, and may be lost. Before embarking on a career as a teacher, for example, one may have a sense of what the meaning of being a teacher is, what it means to devote one's life to teaching. But in the pursuing of the career, one's sense of its meaning will change, possibly radically, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill. In this sense, one is always seeking to catch up with the meaning of teaching that escapes one.

Furthermore, it achieves much less than one supposes to be told that such and such activities are genuinely worthwhile and doing them provides meaning in life, because, even if we agree with that, what is crucial here is our relation to the activities. That is not, as many suppose, a matter of our *finding* these activities meaningful, because, even if we do, that does not guarantee that, from the meaning we find in them, we can read off the meaning of our life. Let us say that intellectual reflection is genuinely worthwhile. And let us say that I find it such, and feel it to be full of meaning. That does not tell me the meaning of my life, and it does not do so even if one factors in all the other worthwhile activities I do and find fulfilling. My life, for all that, could be mean-spirited or pervaded by a suspicious spirit – I could be filled with what Nietzsche calls 'the squinting spirit', a kind of pettiness and resentfulness. The meaning of my life is, indeed, much

closer to the spirit in which I live than it is to my finding meaning in specific activities, however worthwhile, and the spirit in which I live will be precisely what I cannot see about my life but others will be better able to.

It is, indeed, the spirit of a person's life, the spirit in which he or she lives, that is one of the things that gives us better insight into the meaning of his or her life than do the activities he or she pursues. Dostoyevsky remarked that his greatest fear was to be unworthy of his suffering, and we get a far finer sense of his inner life from that comment of his than we would from being told about the things he did. Indeed, that remark casts the things he did in a specific light and helps us better understand the meaning they had for him, and have for us in him, than we otherwise would have done.

It may seem problematic to suppose that the meaning of a life can be obscure to the person whose life it is yet known better to others. However, it is a thought with which we are much more familiar than one might suppose. Consider again for one last time Kafka. There is little doubt that he saw his life as largely a pointless, meaningless struggle with his own recalcitrant personality, with his conflicting needs, desires and longings, with his father, with his work and much else, which left a sense, for him, of his life as a wasteland. Moreover, he regarded his own act of writing as terrible, and his writings as evil. Yet we can see that, precisely in his struggles with all this, his life stands out as a testimony – the phrase is not coincidental – to the human spirit, to the spirit in which he lived and which made of his life something that, through its evident pain, lights up for us, and lights up our lives. His life was not meaningless, even as he thought it (largely) so, and the one is a function of, explains, the other. It is because of his nobility in the face of his suffering that we can see his life to be so rich in meaning, just as we can also see why he thought it devoid of meaning. The pattern is repeated again and again in human life: we all know of people whose lives are filled with pain or suffering through some trouble or difficulty – illness, the death or loss of those loved, and so on – for whom such pain and suffering seem nothing more than a waste, even as we see that their response shows them to be so much more than that. But they cannot see that, and, were they to seek to do so, we would detect the falsity in the posture as that of one who thinks he suffers much more than he does.

On reflection, then, it is, indeed, more intuitive to think that others may know more about the meaning of one's life than one does oneself. Hence there can be many biographies written of the same person that differ, not in what they relate, but in the meaning they think there is in the life and which they seek to draw out.

We can now see better that the kinds of philosophical views with which we began, views that seek to locate the meaning of a life in its activities, are misleading. I do not deny, of course, that people can find meaning in the things they do, and we might have some reason for supposing that some of these things are of genuine value. But the meaning of a life cannot be located at that level. If I am engaged in activities that give me a sense of satisfaction or fulfil me in some way, and which I can reasonably suppose worthwhile in some sense other than my merely making it so, this does not tell me or anyone else that my life has

meaning or what its meaning is. No doubt it offers me a kind of quiescence, but that settles nothing. It entirely ignores the realities of any given individual's location in what Arendt calls the web of human interactions, where meaning leaks away into and is formed by others' deeds and speech. Of the kind of life Wolf has in mind we can ask: What are the social and political conditions that make such a life possible? To what forms of injustice or suffering is it blind? How deeply are its patterns of emotional and intellectual reaction formed by the prevailing cultural possibilities and to what extent has an attempt been made to escape these? And so on. If, for example, Theodor Adorno is right that in our world with its deeply entrenched bureaucratic forms, in our 'administered society', authenticity is impossible, then the meaning of each of our lives may be very different from that which we take it to be. Adorno may be wrong, but if he is what he is mistaken about are the specific judgements of meaning he makes, not the fact that he supposes that the meaning of a life will escape the individual in question. Obviously many other parallel examples could be given.<sup>8</sup>

### **An objection**

Someone may say: All this is not to the point. What anyone wants is to experience his life as meaningful, for it to appear as meaningful in his own consciousness. The subjectivists are right about that, and any given person's insertion into the web of human relationships, the meaning his life has in this context, is neither here nor there from that point of view. Paul Edwards makes this point when he writes: 'We are inclined to say: "If his life had meaning to him, then it had meaning – that's all there is to it"' (Edwards (2008), 127).

That someone may take his or her life to have a given meaning that ignores anything other than the first person perspective is without doubt true. The question is what that shows. The objectivists claim that a person's life can have a meaning other than that he supposes it to have. It will be clear that I agree with that, though my reasons for this, as will be evident, are quite different from those given by the objectivists. But is the subjectivist view right after all?

I do not think so. We need to distinguish between someone's finding his life meaningful and the meaning of his life – this distinction has, of course, been there in what I have been arguing. I am sure that there are many people who insist on the first-person perspective because they are confident that their sense of what the meaning of their life is is roughly what anyone else might think it to be: they do not take themselves to be radically deceived about themselves. But this does not, of course, show that they are, at some level, unaware of the points I have been making. On the contrary, it shows, rather, that they are aware of them, however implicitly, and have taken them into account in their self-understanding. Yet there may be those who simply refuse to think that the meaning of their life could have anything much to do with that which escapes their consciousness of themselves and their life: for them, the meaning of their life cannot depend on anything other than their sense of it as it appears directly in their consciousness.

If the argument I have been offering so far is correct, then I think it is clear that such individuals deny an important aspect of the nature of human plurality and interconnection. They are in flight from an instability that they find unbearable. They wish to deny the *aporia* I mentioned earlier, and, in doing so, there is a sense in which they wish to leave behind their own human condition. I shall return to this point below.

The *aporia* in question, we remember, is that we each wish for our lives to have meaning, to inscribe on them the meaning we wish them to have, but no human being can do this. That thought itself does more, in my view, to reveal the meaning of human life than any talk of activities on a life can. If there is a meaning to human life it is to be found in the fact that human life – and any individual human life – is at cross-purposes with itself. Human beings are unbearable to themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Before doing something to make that thought plausible, it is important to note that here we are moving back and forth between the meaning of any given individual's life and the meaning of human life as such or in itself. Certainly we can explore the meaning of any given individual's life, as in the cases I have already mentioned. But these will always lead into, and back from, reflection on the condition of man as such, of the meaning of human life in the sense of human beings' fundamental condition – spiritual, political, ontological and the like as may be – though we may, for various reasons, wish to stress the one or the other more. There is a dialectical interplay between the two. If it is true, as I have suggested, that human beings are unbearable to themselves, then what is necessary is to give reasons for agreeing, or at least for seeing why this view is plausible. It would be silly to think that one could do anything more than make some helpful gestures towards that in this paper, but, in an effort to do that, let us return to Cottingham.

### **Unbearable thoughts**

In a passage in which he considers the exposure of human lives to chance or luck, Cottingham writes:

Perhaps we just have to accept that whether the sincere pursuit of worthwhile activities yields a meaningful life will be open to chance: the lucky ones on whom fortune smiles will be able to look back at the end of their lives and pronounce them meaningful, while those who are, by birth, or upbringing, or ill-health, or lack of resources, or accident, unable to pursue worthwhile goals, or prevented from reaching them, will just have to lump it. (Cottingham (2003), 69)

Cottingham then comments that 'this bleakly restrictive assessment of the percentage of humans able to achieve a meaningful life...seems both psychologically indigestible and ethically repugnant' (*ibid.*). 'Psychologically repugnant' does not mean to Cottingham himself, as if he were making some personal comment: it means that there is something in human nature (some

might call it a demand of reason) that things not be this way, something unbearable for us in its being so. And no doubt it is in some ways ethically repugnant. This is the key moment in Cottingham's text. It allows him to begin developing a theistic view of meaning as a response to our exposure to chance. But such a response does not answer this question: For all the terribleness of the view in question, is it not true? Cottingham deflects the thought with his comment, and is completely honest that this is what he is doing: he makes no claim that his view rests on anything other than a response to moral and psychological outrage. He cannot bear the thought, because it is, as I have said, an unbearable thought.

Cottingham is just one example. From a certain perspective, it is hard to resist the thought that philosophy is a discipline central to which is an attempt to face, then deflect, the unbearability of humans to themselves, to find an answer to that unbearability. This is what the ancient dispute between philosophy and tragedy was about, as Plato made completely clear. And if that is so, we can suggest an answer to the question I left hanging earlier, namely, why it is that philosophy seems to conceive of the meaning of life in positive terms, as something that enables one to live, whereas literature seems to suggest the opposite. The answer is that philosophy, I am suggesting, is deeply invested in finding answers to the question of human beings' unbearability to themselves. It wants resolution, and so naturally gravitates towards a conception of meaning that shows such resolution to be possible. Literature is far more content to open up, display and explore the surd aspects of human life, without then supposing that there must be some kind of resolution, some answer.

Be that as it may, suppose we say that central to the meaning of human life is human beings' unbearability to themselves. How should we understand that? The most helpful thinker in this context is Pascal. In what remains of this paper, I very briefly suggest why this is so.

### **Pascal and the meaning of life**

Consider this comment of Pascal's:

We have an incapacity for proof that can be conquered by no dogmatism.  
We have an idea of the truth that can be conquered by no scepticism.  
(Pascal (2000 [1670]), §25)

There are many things this means for Pascal, but, in the context of the question of the meaning of life, we can read him here as saying that we believe that there must be some final truth as to the meaning of any given individual life; yet we know that human life is, indeed, open to the kind of contingencies to which Arendt draws our attention. For Pascal, we exist within a kind of profound instability, unable to accept fully the one view or the other, troubled or tormented by our vacillations. We long to transcend our own condition, but, of course, cannot. For Pascal, the absence of any stability here means that more than anything we seek two things: distraction and power. Aware of our own

frailty, that we are 'frail worms of the earth' (ibid., §164),<sup>10</sup> of our lack of control over our lives, over what they mean, we seek distraction, aiming to extract some total meaning from activities that give us a sense of finality. Hence, Pascal sees social life as a permanent struggle between egos intent on imposing on each other their own interpretation of the meaning of things, a source of endless frustration because we live in imagination in others' minds, but can never impose on them the view of us we wish and hence can never be fully secure in the view of ourselves that we have. Thus it is that we seek power over others, and those who are placed socially at a higher level than others enjoy the sensation that they can achieve more of this than the majority. But this too is illusory, because those who have power today will be gone tomorrow and it is only what Pascal calls their 'madness' that allows them to suppose otherwise.

Pascal gives an account of human beings as in permanent flight from themselves, a flight from which they return to themselves again and again in the hope of finding themselves transfigured. But they never do and are thrown back and forth in this way, permanently dissatisfied. No doubt there are details with which one may take issue, but it is hard to resist the sense that Pascal has correctly diagnosed one central aspect of our lives. His aim is to bring us to such a state of awareness of our condition that we shall realise that the only possible resolution is in cleaving to God. Here Pascal expresses what is arguably the central claim of Christianity, namely that only God can fill the void that the insufficiency of human beings to themselves makes of their lives.

On this reading, it is God who knows the meaning of our lives.

Was Pascal right to suppose that we can put an end to our agony through cleaving to God? I do not know. But even those who might want to reply in the negative should nonetheless, I have argued, acknowledge that his account of what leads us to need God in the first place is, in its general outlook at least, true.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have explored these issues at much greater length in Hamilton (2016), esp. in the Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> There is an interesting question here about, e.g., *justified* anger or resentment or whatever. It is not clear to me what Cottingham would say about such in relation to the meaning of any given individual's life. I touch on the role of anger in a meaningful life below.

<sup>3</sup> Some go even further than Cottingham. David F. Swenson (Swenson (2008), 22) claims that 'the essence of life and its happiness is to be sought in the moral consciousness alone'.

<sup>4</sup> The same may be said of the virtues.

<sup>5</sup> It is not obvious that Metz' list is unobjectionable. Perhaps Williams, for example, is not straightforwardly a subjectivist. But this does not affect the main point being made.

<sup>6</sup> Am I not even sometimes the partial author of my life? Yes, in the sense, to be explored below, of being able to offer one version of the meaning of my life amongst the other versions others may offer. Arendt does not need to deny that, any more than she has to deny all individual agency, which she explicitly affirms.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt clearly means, I take it, that such narration solves or assuages nothing *completely*: that it can make some partial sense of the past must surely be something she can accept, since much of her philosophical practice certainly depends on some such thought.

<sup>8</sup> What is the relevance of my argument for the idea that the existence of God gives meaning to our lives? I am not sure. The topic evidently needs an extended treatment that is not possible here. I touch on it very briefly at the end of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> This is to be understood as a claim about our ontological condition, not a remark about individual psychology. Different individuals experience that condition – it is manifest in their psychology – to different degrees at different times. Some experience it profoundly, others not much. The fact that lots of people can get by whilst ignoring it does nothing to refute the claim in question, any more than does the fact that most of us most of the time do not think about

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our mortality refute Heidegger's claim that death is (ontologically speaking) a permanent presence in life.

<sup>10</sup> For Pascal, man is an '*imbécile ver de terre*'. 'Imbécile', for Pascal, does not mean 'imbecile' in the modern sense. It meant 'frail' in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in both French and English.

<sup>11</sup> I thank audiences at the University of Hertfordshire and the University of Leeds for responses to an earlier version of this paper. My particular thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for *Religious Studies*, to whose immensely helpful comments and objections I have tried to find adequate responses in a rewriting of this paper.